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EDMONTON

# THE EDMONTON NEWSPAPERS AND THE NEW UFA GOVERNMENT

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The election of Canada's second farmer's government on July 21, 1921 in Alberta presented the province's commentators with an interesting task. The UFA's doctrine of 'group government' and the principle of 'instructed delegation' now had to be weighed for their potential impact upon Alberta's political system. Would all parts of the organization's policy be implemented, or would the exigencies of government force the UFA into a mode of conduct similar to the political parties it was replacing?

To the province's partisan newspaper editors the second alternative was the only acceptable option. Extensive reform by the UFA would discredit the political parties with which the daily newspapers were identified. This was particularly significant to the Edmonton based newspapers which, being in the capital, enjoyed a reputation as important sources of political opinion in the province. In the first month after the UFA's election the newspapers in Edmonton made every effort to maintain their role as important and credible provincial political commentators.

It is certain that the daily newspapers were one of the main arbiters of public opinion in Alberta, and in the absence of collections of personal papers, their columns remain one of the most important sources for any history of the period. (1) In Edmonton the two newspapers were the Bulletin and the Journal. The Bulletin, as the Liberal party's advocate in Edmonton, was a leading source of opposition to the new farmer's government. It had been founded in 1881 by Frank Oliver, a prominent Alberta Liberal, and was noted for the extent of its political coverage. The Journal had been founded in 1903 as the Conservative party's answer to the popular Bulletin. An examination of the opinions of these two newspapers, as expressed in their columns, indicates how anxious

the editors were that the UFA be regarded as just another political party, no more honorable, or better, than the Liberals or Conservatives.

The leader of the UFA, Henry Wise Wood, had responded eagerly to the Canadian Council of Agriculture's 1918 call for direct political action. Wood stressed the theory, brought to Alberta by the American non-partisan league, of group government, where MLAs would be responsible to the economic groups which had elected them. Once in the House the representatives of the various economic interests would reach a consensus on the issues discussed in the Legislature. Such consensus, according to Wood, would eliminate cabinet government and lead to "the scrapping of all political machinery, political heelers and hangers on." (2) While these theories appealed to the Alberta electorate, the province's newspapers refused to concede that such a system was practical.

The UFA was not prepared to officially assume power until a month after its election. This created a news vacuum about the new government and newspapers throughout the Prairie provinces, conscious of eager readers, were forced to speculate about the UFA's intentions. Editors showed no lack of imagination and every pronouncement of action of the UFA leadership was examined closely for its possible and probable implications.

The Bulletin had campaigned strongly for the incumbent Liberal administration, and the only solace it found in the election results was that Edmonton had gone solidly Liberal. Other than that, the Bulletin intimated that it could not be held responsible for the lapses in judgement of Alberta's rural voters. The editors were pleased to note that as the majority of MLAs represented the farming interest, the UFA would have no opportunity to implement its 'group government' policies. (3) The Bulletin also made it

clear that it was still devoted to the interests of the Liberal party, in spite of its defeat and regarded the UFA as another political party to be combatted in the usual manner.

The Liberal party was taking its electoral defeat "with excellent spirit" as the Bulletin declared on July 21. Premier Stewart was "greatly heartened that the government went down entirely to a wave of class consciousness amongst the farmers and not to any criticism of government policy". (4) The Bulletin assured its readers that "Alberta will have the safeguard of an active and aggressive opposition party." (5) The Liberal party was still very much a going concern, and intended to function as a typical opposition party. The experienced Bulletin realized that the vageries of electoral favor could return the Liberals to government with in the next four years, especially if the UFA could not deliver its promised reform.

The Conservative party had failed to elect a candidate in the province and the Journal's reaction was to call for a system of proportional representation in the city with the unstated assumption that this was the only equitable way to ensure that a complete slate of Liberals would not be elected in the future. (6) Otherwise there was little that the newspaper could contribute in the way of support for its party and the Journal was content to declare initially that the new government should be given a chance before being condemned by the press.

Immediately after the UFA victory, speculation was intense about the type of government which could be expected from the victors. The Bulletin expressed this unease when it observed:

> It is to be hoped . . . that the victors will lose no time in preparing to take the reigns of power, and in calling the legislators together and making known upon

which lines they intend to direct the public affairs of
which they have gained control. (7)

The Bulletin was concerned that the people of Alberta were not yet aware of what the editors realized was the essential information about a y government; that being the identity of the premier and the composition of the ex cutive. It offended the editors' sense of propriety that the UFA was not prepared to provide such necessary information.

In the absence of any hard news about the UFA's intentions, the editors of both newspapers began to indicate which aspects of the party's platform would, in their opinion, impede effective government. The recall notice which UFA members had filed with their constituency organizations before the election was one policy which was condemned. The recall allowed constituents to ensure that MLAs would continue to respect their wishes under pain of losing their seat. Wood's explanation for this measure was that it would assist Albertans to develop "a capacity to govern through their representatives, instead of being governed by them, as at present." (8) His claim was disputed by both newspapers as being undemocratic. The Journal doubted if those members subject to recall could effectively represent their entire constituency. (9) The Bulletin regarded the recall as a method of enforcing Wood's authority and wryly observed that it was "to be kept ready for any UFA member who does not goose step when the local committee gives the word." (10)

Commentary about the UFA became increasingly jaundiced as no information about its intentions, or even the name of the premier was released. The Bulletin repeated its charges that the UFA's political theory was untenable and anti-democratic. (11) To ensure that its readers did not miss the point, the Bulletin employed some extreme caricatures. It was observed at one point that the 'Russian' vote dominated a number of UFA constituencies and readers were told that "the peculiar principles of the UFA . . .

hold a special appeal for the Russian mind and temperament." (12) This merely repeated the 'Bolshevik menace' notion which the Bulletin had advanced at times throughout the election campaign. (13)

While not likening the UFA to Bolsheviks, the Journal also began to wonder at the UFA's failure to name a premier or cabinet ministers. Generally political parties were better prepared to assume power than was the UFA, and their indecision was thought to be an indication of the type of government which the party would provide. The absence of a lawyer in the UFA caucus, and the organization's refusal to allow lawyers to stand as party candidates, caused the Journal to sardonically ask if its readers had given due consideration to the "awful possiblity that an Alberta lawyer could not be found who would accept the attorney-generalship in the province." (14) Finally, on July 28, Herbert Greenfield, the vice-president of the UFA, was selected as premier of the new UFA government. That this selection took place after a secret caucus meeting of government MLA caused the press to gleefully point out that the UFA had not waited long before violating its prohibition against such 'undemocratic' gatherings. It was the first indication to the UFA membership that in spite of the organization's stated principles, there were certain aspects of government which demanded privacy.

The Edmonton newspapers were more restrained in their commentary about the UFA once the farmers had won the election. It seemed to make sense to wait until the government had taken some action before exhausting themselves with criticism. However, the newspapers would print editorials which had originated in other newspapers throughout Canada and around the world. This practise enabled the editors to print vindictive attacks upon their favorite subjects under the guise of informing Albertans about opinions in other parts of Canada.

The Regina Leader, in particular, wrote harsh editorials about the UFA which were carefully reprinted, usually in the Bulletin, but often in the Journal as well. These editorials were a reflection of the political situation in Saskatchewan where the Liberal government had persuaded the farmer's organization to eshew direct political action in the 1921 provincial election in favour of incorporation in the reelected government. The continuation of this support was vital to the government's survival. (15) The Leader, which was owned by the Sifton publishing company, was dedicated to the Liberal interests and had committed itself to ensuring that the farmers did not reconsider their decision regarding direct political action. (16)

The Leader was especially scornful once it learned that the UFA was utilizing tactics associated with the older political parties, such as secret caucus meetings, which it had condemned throughout the election campaign. The Leader's editors asserted that the UFA's stated objectives were 'un-British' and that the results of the election were unfair. The electoral support of the UFA had entitled the party to less than one quarter of the seats in the legislature, instead of the two thirds it now held. (17)

This criticism was justified as the UFA's 29 per cent of the popular vote was less than the 34 per cent received by the Liberals, while the Conservatives, with 11 per cent, had been entirely shut out of legislature, unlike Labour which had elected 4 members with the same popular vote. (18) This evidence of disparity in the electoral system was not brought to the fore by the Edmonton newspapers, although the Journal had earlier advocated proportional representation in the cities, a move that was later implemented by the UFA goverment. (19) The Bulletin did not criticize an electoral system which had been so kind to the Liberals in past campaigns, and from which benefits might still be gained. (20)

In the meantime, Premier Greenfield busied himself with the selection of a suitable cabinet. This, the first action by the new Premier, drew an immediate barrage of observations and criticisms. Greenfield was criticized for the secretive manner in which the cabinet was being chosen. This process made a mockery of the party's claim to be open said the Bulletin. (21) However the Journal observed that the method by which Greenfield selected his cabinet was sensible and would lead to good government. Too often past administrations had allowed outside interests to dictate the composition of the cabinet to the detriment of the province. The Journal also dismissed rumours that the cities would suffer under the UFA's administration, using the record of fairness established by the Ontario farmer's government as an illustration. (22) Greenfield's cabinet was certainly not radical in membership. He had managed to convince John Brownlee, the lawyer for the UFA, to accept the position of Attorney-General, and the remaining members were competent officials who, in Betke's words, were "to display a healthy respect for traditional British parliamentary procedure." (23)

On Friday August 12, the Stewart government officially resigned. The Bulletin printed an extensive eulogy, presciently entitled "The Liberal Chapter Closed", which outlined the accomplishments of past Liberal administrations. The newspaper again lamented that the Liberals were being replaced by a party which endorsed a political system alien to Canada and the British system of representative government. The Bulletin's parting shot as the UFA assumed office was to hope that "the new government and its legislative majority will repudiate in act, if not in word, the principles by the advocacy of which they gained election. (24)

The Journal was more sanguine about the possibilities of good government from the UFA than the Bulletin, although it stopped short of actually endorsing the new government. Its sentiments tallied well with the Bulletin's when the editors predicted

that the "actualities of government" would force the UFA to "find that there are not a few features of the established political parties . . . that they cannot very well get along without. (25)

The UFA, which remained in power until the Social Credit sweep of 1935, was noted for its administrative soundness. This was not the impact which the farmers had hoped to have upon the Alberta political system, nor was it the impact which the editors of the Bulletin and Journal had anticipated. Henry Wise Wood had predicted an end to party machines and cabinet government as a result of the UFA victory. Instead Alberta provincial governments were to become noted for one party dominence and the power of the executive. Those aspects of Alberta's political system which the UFA had targeted for change proved to be the most resiliant, not only during the UFA's tenure, but to the present day.

It was clear within the first month after the 1921 election that the UFA would be forced to conform to the political practices of the day. This conclusion was foregone given the number of members the UFA had elected, the partisan tactics of the opposition parties, and, as the Winnipeg Free Press said, "by the working of the laws which govern our political system." (26) The use of the secret caucus by the UFA and the appointment of a traditional cabinet were clear signals that the UFA leadership understood the practical aspects of the situation. The UFA backbench MLAs took longer to accept the realities of parliamentary government, but by 1922, after abortive attempts by backbenchers during the first session of the new government to advance the UFA's traditional theory of group government, the MLAs were under the control of the executive. (27)

The Bulletin and Journal, as representatives of the partisan press which dominated

Alberta and the other prairie provinces at this time, were relieved that the battle with the UFA was to be conducted on familiar political grounds rather than a moral platform. What the editors of these newspapers did not realize was that the parties they represented would play such small roles in the political battles of the future. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives were active in the 1926 election; indeed the Conservatives nominated candidates in 56 of the 61 provincial ridings and the Liberals ran candidates in 54 constituencies. However the two parties together elected only 12 MLAs whereas the UFA, which only nominated 46 candidates, won 43 seats. (28) During the next half-century neither the Liberals or the Conservatives were to enjoy any sustained period of electoral success. The victory of the UFA in 1921 made the older parties irrelevant in Alberta politics for a good many years.

This was the real threat posed by the UFA, and one that the partisan press of the time did not comprehend. The Bulletin and the Journal attacked the UFA secure in the understanding that the Liberals and Conservatives would be political forces in Alberta. The real meaning of the rise of the UFA and other third parties throughout the west was unexpected and difficult to penetrate. The UFA did change politics in Alberta, albeit not a way that the editors of the two Edmonton newspapers could predict.

## ENDNOTES


1. L.G. Thomas, The Liberal Party in Alberta (Toronto: 1959), p. 209

2. Edmonton Journal, July 20, 1921.

3. Edmonton Bulletin, July 20, 1921.

4. Ibid, July 21, 1921.

5. Ibid, July 22, 1921.

6. Edmonton Journal, July 22, 1921.

7. Edmonton Bulletin, July 20, 1921.

8. Edmonton Journal, July 20, 1921.

9. Ibid, July 27, 1921.

10. Edmonton Bulletin, July 22, 1921.

11. Ibid, July 23, 1921.

12. Ibid, July 25, 1921.

13. C.F. Betke, The UFA, 1921-1935 (University of Alberta: 1971), pp. 40-44 for examples of the Bulletin's election coverage.

14. Edmonton Journal, July 26, 1921.

15. D.E. Smith, Prairie Liberalism (Toronto: 1975), pp. 86-87.

16. S.M. Lipset, Agrarian Socialism (Toronto: 1950), p. 63.

17. Edmonton Bulletin, August 2, 5, 1921.

18. A Report on Alberta Elections, 1905-1982 (Edmonton: 1983), p. 11.

19. Ibid, pp. 42, 193-204.

20. L.G. Thomas, "The Liberal Party in Alberta, 1905-1921" in Carlo Caldonola ed. Society and Politics in Alberta (Toronto: 1979), p. 11.

21. Edmonton Bulletin, August 11, 1921.

22. Edmonton Journal, August 12, 1921.

23. Betke, p. 50.

24. Edmonton Bulletin, August 12, 1921.

25. Edmonton Journal, August 13, 1921.

26. Ibid, August 12, 1921.

27. Betke, pp. 50-55.

28. Report on Alberta Elections, p. 12.

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